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ABSTRACT

Drawing from a doctoral research project in progress, this report examined variations and similarities of five Swedish leisure centers for school-age child care and examined teachers' attitudes and behaviors toward the children categorized by the different leisure centers. Teacher-child interaction was observed and videotaped; and these data were augmented by interviews. The teachers also kept diary-notes of their daily activities and reflections, which served to connect the teachers' thoughts and conceptions with what in fact they were doing. The results indicated that there are large variations between the leisure centers, suggesting that systems of interaction are very different as a whole, as are the individual teachers' attitudes and behavior. To complete the thesis project, these differences will be formulated in categories such as group-control, style of leadership (authoritarian or democratic), positive or negative attitudes, and the teachers' ability to capture the children's attention. Contains six references. (Author/AP)

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EDUCATIONAL PROCESSES IN LEISURE CENTRES

Maria Ursberg

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EDUCATIONAL PROCESSES IN LEISURE CENTRES

Maria Ursberg

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This report presents the issues and methods of my doctoral thesis and was presented at The Third European Conference on the Quality of Early Childhood Education, Kriopigi, Greece, 1993. The study focuses on leisure centres and especially on the teacher's attitudes and behaviour towards the children. The assumption is that there is a large discrepancy between different centres. The purpose of the study is to describe and analyse variations and similarities in five centres as "systems of interactions".

A combination of methods is used. Teacher-child interaction is observed by video-registration and these data are completed by interviews. The teachers also make diary-notes of their daily activities and reflections.This method aims to connect the teachers' thoughts and conceptions with what in fact they are doing.

The data indicate that there are large variations between the leisure centres. "Systems of interactions" are very different as a whole as well as the teacher's attitudes and behaviour. This will be formulated in categories such as group-control, style of leadership in terms of authoriterian/democratic, positive or negative attitudes and the teacher's ability to catch the childrens attention or not.

Keywords: After-school care, educational processes, leisure centre, leisure time teacher, studies of interaction, teacher's attitudes and behaviour.

EDUCATIONAL PROCESSES IN LEISURE CENTRES

Introduction

Swedish women have among the highest employment rates in the western world - although many of them work part-time. Some of the factors that contributed to this development are a high demand for labour in the 1960s, the expansion of the public sector in the 1970s and changes in family law. The consequence of these various developments is that in the majority of Swedish families, both parents work outside the home or study. With around 80% of all Swedish women with children under the age of seven gainfully employed, the society has to ensure that children can enjoy support in their upbringing.

Among the aims and measures of family policy in Sweden, there is public child care for younger schoolchildren aged 7-12. Leisure centres are established for schoolchildren whose parents are gainfully employed or studying, as well as for those children who need extra support for their development. The centres are usually open between 6.30 in the morning and 18.00 in the evening, Monday to Friday all year around. Swedish children begin school at the age of seven and in first and second class they are at school about 3,5 - 5 hours each day.

The leisure centres are financed jointly by the state, the municipalities and parental fees. 49% of all 7-9 year olds have a place in a leisure centre or family day care. This figure drops to 7% for the older age group of 10-12 year olds. Two members of staff, often a leisure time teacher (fritidspedagog) and a child care attendant (barnskötare) usually work with a group of 20 children. An educational programme appeared in 1988.

The aim behind the programme for all leisure centres in the country is:

- to achieve a good, even quality
- to stimulate children's further development
- to facilitate planning, supervision, evaluation and development at both the municipal level, in pre-schools and in the leisure centres themselves

The activities should be based largely on the children's life situation, their interests, previous experiences and special needs. The work in leisure centres covers the following main areas; cultural activities, such as language, drama, music and art, painting and pottery, nature observation. These topics manifest themselves naturally through play, activities, daily tasks, etc. It is important that the children can take a rest from school activities and spend most of their time playing.

I am a leisure time teacher myself and the choice of research area, questions and interest are of course a result of my insight into and pre-understanding of the caring of school children.

A day at the leisure centre

The day begins usually at 6.30. One of the staff opens the centre and some children arrive during the first hour. At 7.30 breakfast is served and 8.00 half of the group leaves for school. The other part of the group begins school at 10.00. During this hours period it is quite peaceful, the children are engaged in whatever they want to do; playing, painting, reading, sewing, doing woodwork, pottery, etc. The staff work as instructors. Between 10.00-11.30 all children are at school and the leisure time teacher has 1,5 hours for planning and administrative tasks. At 11.30 school is finished for some of the children.

Upon their return this group relaxes for a while, or they start to play or do similar activities as the other children did in the morning. At 13.30 all gather together for "circle time", conducting joint activities for about 10-20 minutes. The items are dealt with to see who is absent, talking about if something interesting has happened during the day, providing information of what is planned for the afternoon or later in the week. Some days a week activities are organized for the whole group or for some smaller groups depending on the activities. This is going on until around 15.00 when a small meal is served. After 15.30 the children begin to leave the leisure time centre, their timetable is usually according to the parents' hours of work. The leisure centre closes at 18.00.

Background

Everyone who works with or has visited leisure centres knows that they all are different. When you have been in the group for a while, you can get a feeling of the social climate – if there is a warm atmosphere between children and the staff and if they get on well together (Ekholm & Hedin, 1991). Quite soon you have aquired an opinion of "how it works just here". What we observe (sometimes unconsciously) and registrate is primarily the interaction between staff and children: Is this interaction affected by positive or negative attitudes? What is the outstanding feature of the leisure time teacher's behaviour? Do teacher and children get on well together? Do the children get the possibility to develop their creativity? Does the teacher manage to call the childrens attention? Do the staff have a sensitive ear to the children's initiative and needs?

It is difficult to give a fair description of a social climate - but it's easy to have an opinion! Larsson (1991) talks about different existing systems of interaction in the social climate.

He illustrates this as:

> "In some systems teacher and children laugh more than in other systems. The organized activities and the atmosphere where thisis realized inspire laughing. And if there is a lot of laughter in asystem one day, there is probably a lot of laughter in this system even the next day."
>
> (my transl.a.a. s 7)

Larsson describes the activities, situations and the attitudes as a social and pedagogical system where the teacher's and childrens behaviour in different situations together with the organized activities are "something more" than separated events, and that it is self- strengthening and self-reproduced.

Focus in the present study is *the leisure time teacher's attitudes and behaviour in interaction*. The teacher has intentions with her/his acting which is reflected and expressed in attitudes and behaviour. To describe interaction, the study is directed towards observing "organized activities". These are a central part in daily work. They are planned and prepared by the staff (sometimes together with the children) and have an explicit purpose (Johansson, 1984). In these organized activities the teacher's role is expressed as pedagogue and leader of the group of children, as it appears in a way that can be interpreted.The focus here is on the visible and recurrent behaviour and attitudes that appear in the interaction. This, what is called "visible and recurrent behaviour" is recorded on video.

The next area deals with *the professional role*. Here is the intrest focused in the teacher's attitudes to "caring". What do they mean by that or what are they doing when they " take care of"? Further I am also intrested in "the pedagogical task", the teachers' role of leadership in the group, their intentions with work, consciousness in the planning and organization of activities, as well as the teaching methods.

Other circumstances can affect the relation teacher-children. Besides documents at a central and local level there are factors of importance which can influence the daily work, for example physical facilities and equipment, ideological aims in policies, the organisation of routine activities, child staff ratio and composition of child-group (Johansson, 1984; Svensson, 1981). Important factors are the basic conditions of the local planning at the individual centre and the timetable of children's presence in the group. At present this will be expressed as *organizational structure.*

Three fields appear as central factors affecting the social climate:

- interaction leisure time teacher- children
- the professional role
- the organizational structure

This is a frame for the questions but in the daily work these fields are of course integrated. The main questions are:

- Which relations exist between different factors within each field?
- Which relations exist between these fields and how do they affect one another?
- How do these relations appear in the organized activities?

Conditions of importance for the social climate are given in the teacher-child interaction, where the staff dominates the relation. The issue here is:

- What happens in the interaction teacher-child in the organized activities?
- What is expressed in the teacher-child interaction about the teachers' attitude towards the children?

- What possibilities do children have to influence the contents in the daily work?
- How does the teacher react to initiatives from the children?
- How does the teacher stimulate childrens creativity?

The content of work and tasks and the teaching/leading role are of importance for the interaction (Johansson, 1984). This can be studied in the teacher's professional role, attitudes to "caring" and "the educational task", intentions with work, in roles of leadership, consciousness in the planning and organization as well as the teaching methods (Annerblom, 1979).

The issue here is:

- What is the leisure time teacher's conception of the dual task of care and education?
- Which intentions does the teacher have with the work at the leisure centre in general and with organized activities in particular?
- How does the leasure time teacher comprehend and motivate her/his chosen leader-role?

The field "organizational structure" includes both external and internal conditions where the teacher is organizing and planning the work. The leisure centres are established and organized by the municipality, and the aims and even the methods of work are formulated in central and local documents (Svensson, 1981). Furthermore, the time-table of children's presence in the group forms a basic condition of the local planning at the individual centre. These factors constitute a framework for organizing and planning content and methods of work, and affect which activities that are suitable and possible to realize.

The interesting point is:

– Which organizational structure exists at the individual centre?
– How does the teacher structure, organize and plan the work and the activities starting out from the existing framework?

Purpose

The main purpose of this investigation is to describe and analyze the relations within and between 1) the teacher-child interaction 2) the teacher's professional role, the teachers' conception of her/his profession and it's tasks 3) and the framework as the base for the teachers' organizing and planning of the work and activities. Primarily my intention is to discuss and get knowledge of pedagogical processes in interaction. This is a problem of communication – and it's a central point in situations of education - it is of vital importance what possibilities the teacher offers the individual child and the group as a whole. A purpose is to make the reader reflect upon how the different variables are related to each other and vary under different conditions. An increasing knowledge and consciousness of what happens in these matters will help to inspire and develop teaching and interaction.

Limitations

The investigation has no intention to describe the social climate as a whole, but to study the different relations at the specific leisure centre. For that reason it is not relevant to investigate effects for instance of school, parents or family because this doesn't have any direct influence on the daily work.

The staff in the investigation is represented only by "leisure time teachers", child care attendants are not included in the study. The motive for this is that teachers have the responsibility for organizing and planning the centre and it is also a teaching profession with a university degree, which is not the case with the child-care attendants.

The organized activities is limited in time, but they are containing a great deal of interaction teacher-child, attitudes and behaviour, professional roles, intentions with work, planning of contents and methods of work etc. Because of these wide range of relevant content, my assumption is that it is possible to discover and interpret the system of connected relations within and between the previous described three fields (p 6).

Selection of leisure time centres

The empirical study is made in 5 leisure centres. There are some criteria which must be fulfilled in the selection. It must be "typical" leisure centres meaning that the staff ratio, facilities and equipment should be sufficient in relation to the number of children. No centre with "too many social problems" or what we usually call "children with special needs and care" is selected. Such groups often have extra resources, assistants etc. In search for similarities and differences in patterns of interaction, it can be expected that five leisure centres with different "organizational structure" would be a relevant number.

To identify the centres, I received assistance from the leisure time teacher-training department, which organizes teacher practice for the students. The teacher-trainers have a good insight over existing centres in the region, how they are organized and work. Primarily the centres are selected by the training teachers' conception of "the general order" at the centre – good/bad reputation – if they are acceptable or not. The leisure centres must of course even have acceptable physical facilities and a balanced composition of children in the groups.

Method

The main purpose is to describe and analyze interaction in the teacher-child relation, the teacher's professional role and the organizational structure. The empirical study is made at five leisure time centres and a combination of qualitative methods is used to make it possible to identify what happens in the daily life. Teacher–child interaction is observed by video-registration and these data is completed by interviews. The teachers also make diary-notes of their daily activities and reflections. The children are interviewed in a dialog, more as a chat. This is a method which aims to connect the teachers thoughts and conceptions, with what in fact they are doing.

Video-registration a method of observation

It is an advantage when processes and relations can be observed in their natural settings. The information concerning interaction and the leisure time teachers' behaviour and attitudes in the group of children is documented by video. Around ten "organized activities" will be recorded at each centre. These activities occur two or three times a week. Sometimes the whole group participates and sometimes just a few children. This depends on the topic or theme. Examples of topics recorded are cooking, making dolls for a theatre and even writing the story, wood-work and "living in different countries of the world".

I have also recorded some circle-time occations where children and teacher together plan coming activities and discuss topics or themes. Every session lasts between half an hour and one and half hours. The camera runs without a break and follows the teacher in her behaviour, how she initiates contact and what she says and does. The interest is directed towards the teachers' ability to communicate with the whole group and the individual child, to get information about "the style of interaction".

Interviews with leisure time teachers and children

The video recorded data will be completed by teacher-and child interviews. The questions in the teachers' interviews are thematic and the teachers are asked to formulate and describe their conceptions and thoughts concerning internal and external frameworks, organizing and planning, content and methods of work and view of the teacher profession and tasks.

At first the teachers give a general information of the centre, which means a description of the staff and the group of children, facts about employment, conditions of leisure time teacher and child care attendants, professional experience and how long they have worked at the centre. Further they describe the group of children, not just sex and age but also their conception and experiences of the climate in the group. Among other things, this has to do with which possibilities and limitations exist for realising activities. Here the teacher can talk about for example the social climate in the group and how this can affect possibilities for realizing activities or the timetable of the childrens presence at the centre. This time-table is important because the childrens' presence is the basic condition for the planning. It gives directions of work, a description of available conditions and provides the framework from which the planning is made.

The teachers also talk about what they think are positive things to do with the children. Here, they give some examples of activities where the children are positive, stimulated and engaged in what is going on. In describing this you get information about the teachers conception of how it works when it works "well". They also describe how they plan the work. We get information about what is planned and organized at the centre and how the day is structured. There can be large variation between different centres, from teachers who hardly organize work at all to those who plan the whole day in a quite fixed schedule.

The next question deals with what the central and local policies mean for the planning of the organized activities and the work as a whole. The importance of central policies for the daily work at leisure centres has been discussed by the researcher R. Svensson (1981). The leisure time teachers and child-attendants in his investigation answer that these are of less importance when you talk about aims and purposes. The official aims and purposes are expressed in a very abstract level and they are not possible to transfer directly in the work with the children. They gives no guidelines of how to work. These policies mostly focus on physical facilities such as staff ratio, compositions of childgroups, and economical resources.

The interview even focuses on the teacher's professional role, conception and thoughts about "caring", pedagogical tasks, intentions with work and how they get the children interested in what is going on. Another important question is about the teachers' conceptions of what "care" means at the leisure time centre. It does not necessarily mean the same thing as in pre-school where the children are younger and obviousy demand more "caring". I want them to describe what they are doing when they "take care of" children. Is this an important task at the centre or is it more important to teach the childen, give them some kind of knowledge in order to stimulate development?

This has to do with the next question that deals with the leisure time centre's pedagogical task. In their answers here, the teachers talk about what they want the children to learn. Is it training of specific skills, social training, stimulating independence and self-consciousness or what does the pedagogical task involve? Further, there are some questions dealing with the role as a leader of the group, intentions with work and how the teacher takes care of childrens' initiatives and suggestions. The leisure time teachers talk about what kind of leader-role they prefer, a democratic or a more authoritarian role.

All these questions concerning teachers' thoughts and conceptions of "caring" and pedagogical tasks, intentions with work, leader-roles, the teacher–children relationship, will become apparent and can also be studied in the video-recorded situations of organized activities.

My intention is to follow up the teachers' answers in the interwiews with the video-recorded situations of interaction. Are they doing what they say and want to do – or are they doing something else? In the child interview the questions are loosely structured. What is interesting to know is their thought about the leisure centre they attend in general, their opinion of organized activities, cosiness, the childrens' possibility to influence the choice of activities and the teachers' attitudes and behaviour.

Diary/situations-notes

The method also include observations by diary notes. When I visit the leisure centre the teacher sometimes gives interesting information besides the situations of videorecording and interview. The leisure time teacher makes notes at every occasion, of the aim of activity, and afterwards what happened and reflections on why it did happen.

Inventory of central and local policy documents for leisure centres

The research field contains factors from different levels, from society to the individual. The interaction teacher-children is not an internal matter, there is a relation to the aims and the responsbility of the society and the policy of public child care. At this level there are different documents and laws which formulate social responsbility and intentions. On the local level there are more concrete aims and directives which are guiding principles of how to organize all the child care in the municipality.

Besides these documents there is a plan for the individual group made by the staff at the leisure centre. In this document part of the data collection, relevant information will be selected regarding how the policies in different levels are connected to interaction teacher-children and the social climate at the leisure time centre.

Report of present position

Data has been collected at four leisure centres at present. The analysing process has not started yet and of course it is too early to draw conclusions. However, I can see at the videotapes that there are large variations between the leisure time centres and the systems of interaction are very different as a whole, as well as the teachers' attitudes and behaviour.

The result will be formulated and described in categories as group-control, style of leadership in terms of authoritarian or democratic, positive or negative attitude towards the children and the teacher's ability to catch the children's attention – or not.

There are also similarities, in ambitions and intentions with work, in conceptions of the professional role and in the contents of "caring" and "the pedagogical task". My issue is now to describe and analyse these different "systems of interaction" and what kind of characteristic attitudes / behaviour exists for each of them. When similarities and differences come forward, it will be possible to understand how these factors affect the educational processes in the leisure time centres partcipating in the investigation.

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